



The Kentucky Review

Volume 14 | Number 2

Article 8

Summer 1999

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J. Hill Hamon
Whippoorwill Press

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Recommended Citation

Hamon, J. Hill (1999) "Some Notes on Larkspur Press Publications as Fine Printing," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 14 : No. 2 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol14/iss2/8>

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Some Notes on Larkspur Press Publications as Fine Printing
by J. Hill Hamon

On Friday, November 13 1998, the University of Kentucky King Library Press celebrated the 25th. Anniversary of the founding of Gray Zeitz's Monterey, Kentucky, based Larkspur Press. A major display of the collected works of the press was mounted and an evening of readings by authors and friends was held to honor Gray for his exemplary work. This essay concerns his work as *fine printing*.

I have known Gray Zeitz since he was a student at the University of Kentucky, when he was an apprentice to Carolyn Hammer at the King Library Press. I saw some of his publishing work before I met him. He was editing and producing a magazine *handsel* by mimeograph. Individual sheets were bound by punching random holes along the left margin through which black thread was crudely laced, forming a strong but unattractive binding. Carolyn Hammer once described the magazine to me as *wretched*, which aptly described the appearance of his publication. The prose and poetry that *handsel* contained, however, were considerably better than the binding.

I have been asked to comment on the many publications that have issued from the Larkspur Press, as Fine Printing. I was delighted to accept Jim Birchfield's invitation to honor Gray and, after consuming an appropriate mental-stimulating libation, began to think about the task. I was immediately stumped and frustrated because although I felt I could recognize fine printing, I was hard pressed to define it. Back during the winter, I had read the second edition of Roderick Cave's monumental *The Private Press* four consecutive times, and I did not completely agree with his somewhat diffuse definition of fine printing. Essentially, he contended that:

- if a printer chooses a distinguished manuscript;
- hand-sets it in a distinctive and unusual typeface, often an exclusive private type, created for him by a prominent punch cutter, such as Edward Prince;
- uses an Albion, Stanhope, Columbian, or Washington hand press;

— prints on dampened, handmade paper — often on paper made by a mill to the publisher's specifications, on special order, specifically for an edition of a book, for the exclusive use of a press;

— often employing elaborate wood-engraved decorations and illustrations;

— and then binding the work in boards covered with some distinctive covering, full goatskin or leather — one can produce a beautiful iconobook, that can be admired as much as or more, physically, than for its textual content. Cave's models were outstanding — the books of the Kelmscott, and to a slightly lesser degree, the Doves Press. I do not share such a restricted definition of fine printing. These books are, of course, recognized as being among the loveliest ever created. After reading so much about the Kelmscott books, I recently asked Jim Birchfield if there were any in the King Library Special Collections that I could examine. He produced a massive, boxed copy of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, and I was blown away by its total magnificence. It was an overwhelming emotional experience for me that bordered on a religious revelation! I had never imagined, or seen such a book. How incredibly distinctive!

A definition of Fine Printing is a tall order. That I feel that I can recognize it when I see it, is a kind of definition in itself, but that has not always been the case. It was some years after I first became interested in the Black Arts before I appropriated the tastes and prejudices of acknowledged expert printers, typographers, paper-makers, bookbinders, and critics concerning what they considered to be the elements of fine printing. The first time I saw hand-made paper in books, I was rather repulsed; it resembled a cheap, rough paper towel to my insensitive eyes.

Fine printing should define and ennoble the subject matter of the book. The printing techniques should enhance the subject, yet should not be so obtrusive as to interfere with the text. Beatrice Ward contended that printing should be invisible, a "crystal glass," so as not to distract the reader from the message of the text. It should delight the eye, and make one want to pick it up, admire it, and read it. To me, fine printing elicits a picture of a very labor-intensive endeavor — utilizing the highest quality paper available, better than ordinary binding, and great attention given to the finer points of typography, to choice of typeface, spacing, leading, and imposition on the page, consistency of layout, inking, distinctive illustrations, and the judicious use of color. I associate fine printing

with limited quantity because the out-of-pocket expenses, plus the labor involved, generally do not make such books commercially profitable. Fine printing implies to me that the producer took whatever infinite pains that were necessary to do the best possible job, something militated against by ordinary commercial interests. Such niceties observed in producing the books immediately bespeak of conservative elegance. Most fine printing comes from the "private presses," where the practitioners marry several of these varied crafts into what they consider to be an art form.

Larkspur Press books are in their own quiet way, just as distinctive as Kelmscott or Doves Press books. Gray Zeitz's books have a style all their own, yet he doesn't slavishly follow a rigid formula in their creation. All of his books are different, like handsome people. One easily recognizes a Larkspur book because of its understated, muted colored binding, and its clean, warmly elegant, classic typography. Each book lovingly reflects the touch of his artist's craftsman's hand and the joy of his meditation while creating it.

Among his most used typefaces are the medium-weighted Emerson, Palatino, Garamont, Perpetua, and Joanna, and the bold American Uncial. His display faces include Garamond Bold, Caslon, Centaur, Goudy Oldstyle, Garamont, Garamond, American Uncial and Palatino.

Gray always uses the best paper available, all acid-free, and includes hand, or mold-made papers, and fine book papers such as Curtis Rag, Iyo Glazed, Mohawk letterpress, Ragston, Roma handmade (Fabriano), Ingress tobacco paper, Molino, Biblio (a German paper), Johanno (a mold-made Arches) and Fabriano Ingres. Pamphlets are sewn into Strathmore cover stock, Japanese dyed paper, and Curtis and Arches cover.

Gray uses a combination of *Kentucky windage* and the Van de Graff method of positioning his type on the page, a simple method, utilizing geometry for determining proportional page sizes and establishing non-arbitrary margins. This produces a width by height ratio of 1:1.5, called the *Golden Canon* — that the height of the text page is equal to the width of the page. This creates a harmonious balance between the areas occupied by the text page and the margins. These relationships produce a margin progression of 2:3:4:6. These margins and placements of type on the page closely conforms to the *Divine Proportions, or Golden Section*, that mysterious ratio of 1:1.618 that is so pervasive in the biological

world. Most life forms, in their nearly infinite patterns of symmetry, conform to the mathematical Fibonacci sequence of numbers that results in a profound psychological *rightness* of appearance to the eye.

He prefers close, even word spacing, about 4-to the em, adequately leaded, with tastefully adjusted ragged right margins. The resulting printed text is delightfully easy to read. Although Gray has experimented with a variety of oil-based inks designed for letterpress, he prefers Van Sohn 10850, a latex offset ink that gives him a superior intense black impression. Unlike oil-based inks, it has the advantage of remaining open on the inking disk and rollers for long periods of time, yet dries quickly after the impression is made. His colored initial letters and other decorations are done in red, orange, or blue latex inks. He has recently become expert in the use of pale yellow tint blocks over which he prints his photoengravings and wood cuts, enhancing their appearance greatly.

Larkspur publication, books, pamphlets, and broadsides, are illustrated with photoengravings of pen and ink drawings and photographs, tipped-in actual photographs, or distinctive wood engravings, produced by a galaxy of at least 16 contributing artists.

Gray has bound many of his smaller editions as pamphlets, sewing them in attractive, substantial covers. Larkspur's regular edition books are bound by a family-run bindery in Roachdale, Indiana, whose craftsmen are sympathetic to Gray's desired distinctive appearance of Larkspur editions. The fine editions have been sewn on sewing frames and bound by hand by Deborah Bosley of the Bittersweet Bindery, and by Carolyn Whitesel of the Yellowbird Editions Bindery. They use colorful and tasteful hand-marbled paper for endsheets, and paste papers for covering the boards.

The only complaint that I have with Gray's books is that they are all so damned gigantic — compared with the books of the Whippoorwill Press!